

# **BINARY**



***a documentation***

Morgan Black  
*Arte Povera Project*





# *Arte Povera Project*

The title of this piece of sculptural assemblage is 'Binary'.

Because it's all about current perceptions of gender which are not categorized as strictly 'male' or 'female' – the binary options still presented on many personal and official forms, as well as in the minds of many individuals.

## **Overview**

The decision was taken early on to create the piece purely in black and white - because that's how society still tends to view gender. You're man or woman, boy or girl, lad or lass. Those things in between the two poles, the shades of grey, are what upset our pre-conceived definitions and parental and societal guidelines of how we all were supposed to dress at school, at college, at work and then throughout life.

For that reason, the pinned-on statements and comments from, and about, non-binary genders are similarly presented in a stark black and white format – black text on pieces of white paper. It's not just 'them' who judge or stereotype such people - we do it ourselves. ('Ourselves'? - oh yes, I'm one of those 'shades of grey', though only on a part-time and social basis).

## **Starting Point**

The genesis of this idea dates back to when I was in Manchester this summer as part of the world's largest Transgender festival, 'Sparkle in the Park', held every July in Sackville Gardens. While I was at Sparkle this year, I saw one young trans woman walking about wearing a simple black tee-shirt. On it were printed only two words, in white. The words were: 'FUCKING TRANNY'. I'm still sorry I didn't photograph her, or ask her where she got it. I'm still reluctant to look it up online as typing those two words into any search engine will no doubt produce some eye-watering results.

The power of that black-and-white tee shirt still resonates with me today. Deeply offensive and challenging to most prejudiced and binary-tuned minds, it also pre-empts the likely reaction of many to the person they see wearing it. Like the African-American tactic of stealing back the 'N' word to use among themselves, what was an insult has become a badge of honour, albeit one with a skewed sense of humour, in this case at least. It appealed to me on every level, which is why I still recall it 4 months later. And in its simple and stark black and white design, it throws back a challenge into the faces of those who accept and recognise only black-and-white definitions and pre-assigned gender labels.

## **My Personal Investment**

Sparkle is an amazing experience. I've been to the last three celebrations, since 2014, and it's fair to say that these events changed my life. Events, gestures, moments in space and time with other people - whether crowds or individuals - can bring such vibrancy and excitement, togetherness, integration, respect, understanding, support, and fun. I'm more fortunate than many on the Trans spectrum by being a part-timer. I'll never know the anguish of waiting for delayed psych appointments, enduring major surgery or suffering the side-effects of hormones, nor the legal and official ramifications of having to create a whole new identity for bureaucratic purposes.

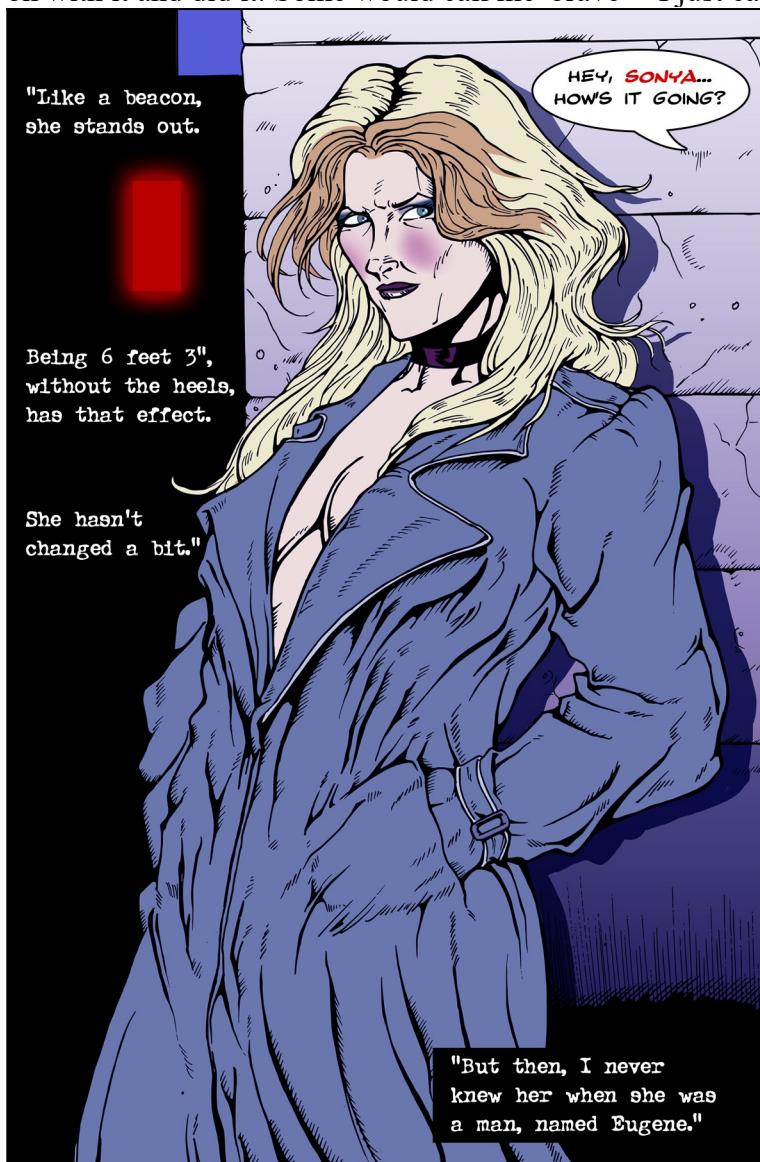


*Me at Sparkle 2015...snapped by a professional, Paul Cheeseman:*  
[http://www.pbase.com/meagre\\_offerings/image/160757143](http://www.pbase.com/meagre_offerings/image/160757143)

When I was at school, boys wore short pants 'til age 10, then long pants. Girls wore pinafores and then skirts. There was no option for boys to wear skirts or girls to wear trousers, except for multicultural or religious reasons. In my class we all sang Christian hymns on a Friday assembly, including the kids who weren't even Christian. Conformity wasn't just expected, it was pretty much enforced, albeit tacitly at times. Sometimes I think about those days, and ponder how much times have changed. And at other moments, I think they haven't yet changed enough – because if they had, people like me wouldn't have to make works like this, because the issues to which they refer ought not to exist any more.

But they do...

Creating a piece of art about this subject in a public place means I'm doing something I've never done before – I'm pushing this part of my own personality into other people's lives in a day-to-day environment. It may be challenging for some people in our group, but I'm happy to discuss it with anyone, and to any level of detail. Like stepping out into the street wearing full makeup, girl hair, heels and a dress, it can be an intimidating prospect to open up a part of your personal nature to strangers, colleagues and acquaintances. Yet in both cases, I never thought twice about it. I just got on with it and did it. Some would call me 'brave' – I just call it 'expressing myself'.



In early 2016 I wrote and drew the first issue of a graphic novel series set in contemporary Russia, 'пролитой крови' ('Spilled Blood'), which introduced as its principal supporting character a transgender female prostitute named Sonya. The purpose of this character was to highlight the

extremes of discrimination and hostility towards members of the LGBT community in Russian society today and, as the series is fundamentally a crime thriller centred around an enigmatic Uzbek hitman, it also allowed me to present the worst side of intolerance and violence towards innocent people.

We don't need to visit Russia to find out what prejudice and intolerance are all about, of course, but by choosing to set the series in exotic locations (St. Petersburg, Moscow), I was able to comment freely upon universal issues which also affect those much closer to home. It was this little piece of social commentary which, in my mind, helped to set the foundations for the present artwork, 'Binary'.

*Panel from 'Spilled Blood', Issue 1 (Fenriswulf Books, 2016)*

### **The Bits & Pieces**

Apart from the mannequin body, which was 'found' in the art school itself, the other items were bought by me for a few pounds from local charity shops. The monochromatic beads were chosen for their simplicity and because they're the kind of cheap trinkets which a novice cross-dresser, seeking some additional feminine detail for an outfit to wear in the house that night, might grab and add to a somewhat embarrassed and rushed purchase of shaving foam, or masculine aftershave. And cheap enough to throw away should he fear discovery, ridicule, etc.



*Reform St. Charity shops...great for cheap girl clothes, and other cool things*

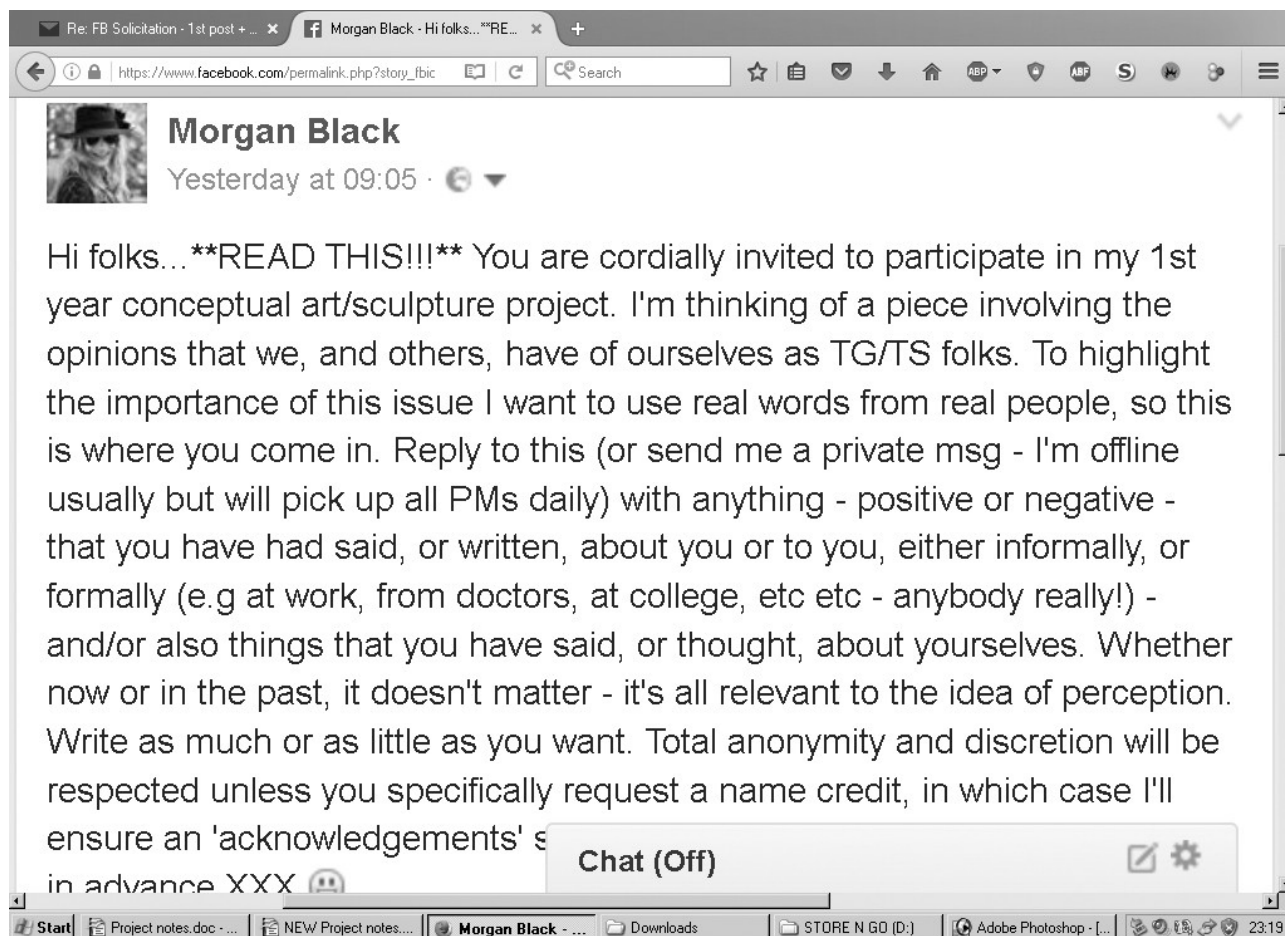
An old brassiere and a lacy top were chosen to outfit the muscular male mannequin, the see-through top allowing the incongruous bra to be visible.

The printed/scanned words pinned to the feminine outfit are all genuine. They are comments, perceptions, and feelings which TG people pin to themselves, and which others pin to them, and use to label them. People like to apply labels to other people and things, so they fit their pigeonhole minds. It's not a criticism – we all do it. However, there's a difference between doing it internally, as a mental habit and aid to making sense of a new or unfamiliar experience or individual, and



externalizing it, where it becomes a public, expressive gesture, applied to another person or group of persons, in the form of word or action.

I originally solicited feedback from TG friends and strangers via Facebook but due to an extremely disappointing response, I finally cut and pasted portions of transcripts of interviews with TG persons from a book, 'Sexualities', which was purchased from Oxfam on Reform Street for this very purpose. I spent 2 hours in the media lab scanning, tonally adjusting, cutting up and printing out relevant phrases and sentences from the book, which is American in origin. This, sadly, makes the project far less personal, as I had wanted that thread of association to run through the work. The words themselves, however, are pretty much universal, and there are still a couple of friends' comments pinned on there, which maintain the spirit of my original wishes.



*My original 'shout out' on Facebook was posted to nearly 100 friends, and several Scottish and national TG groups, as well as the Dundee Uni LGBT+ page. I got a total of 4 responses, from a potential audience of 2,196 people – or, 1 in 549*

1 share



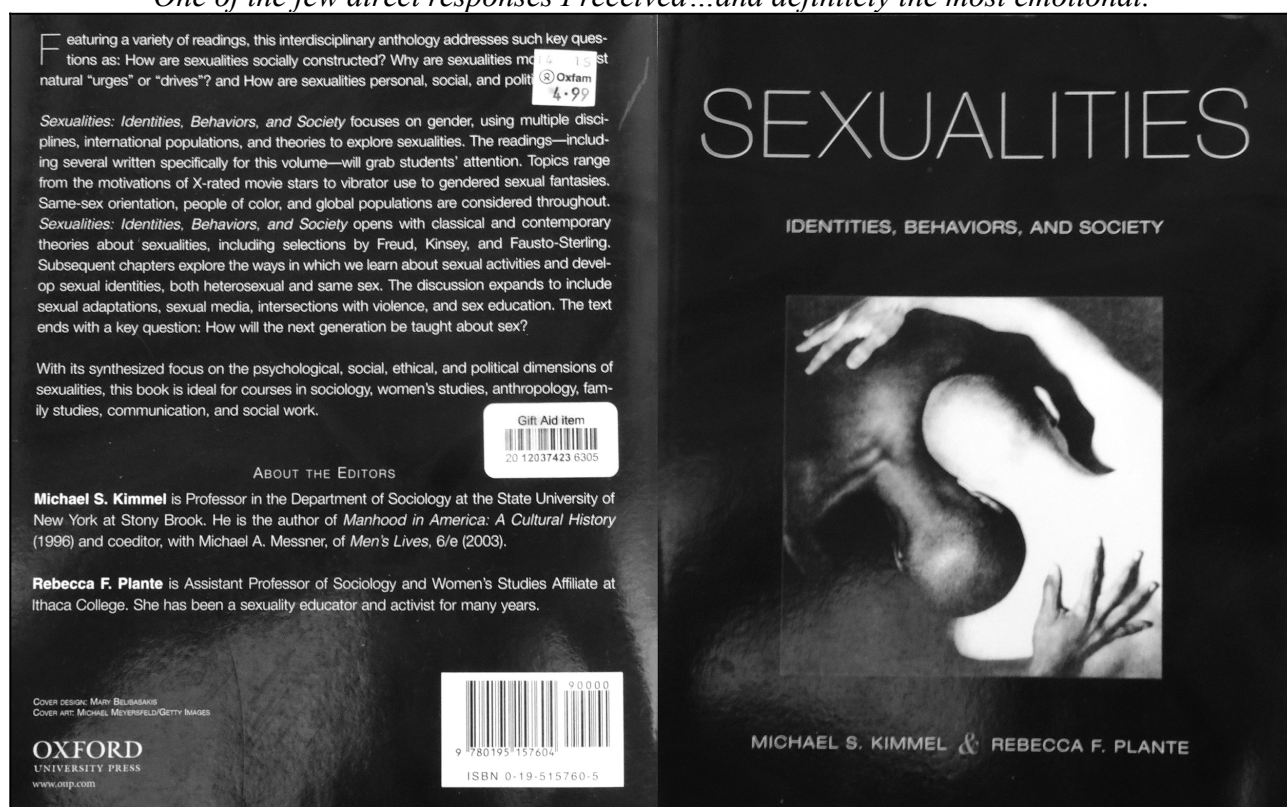
**Kristin Carter** Is the devil within us our fear of what we should be or the ravages of puberty and the relentless disfigurement of testosterone? The mirror shows an ageing man, when in my heart I long to see that young woman within me; so exciting and so fearful of what she could do to the both of us. The love that I never want to lose; even though I know that she never leaves my side...

Unlike · Reply · 1 · 12 October at 23:21



**Morgan Black** replied · 2 Replies

*One of the few direct responses I received...and definitely the most emotional.*



*'Sexualities'. Great book for a fiver*



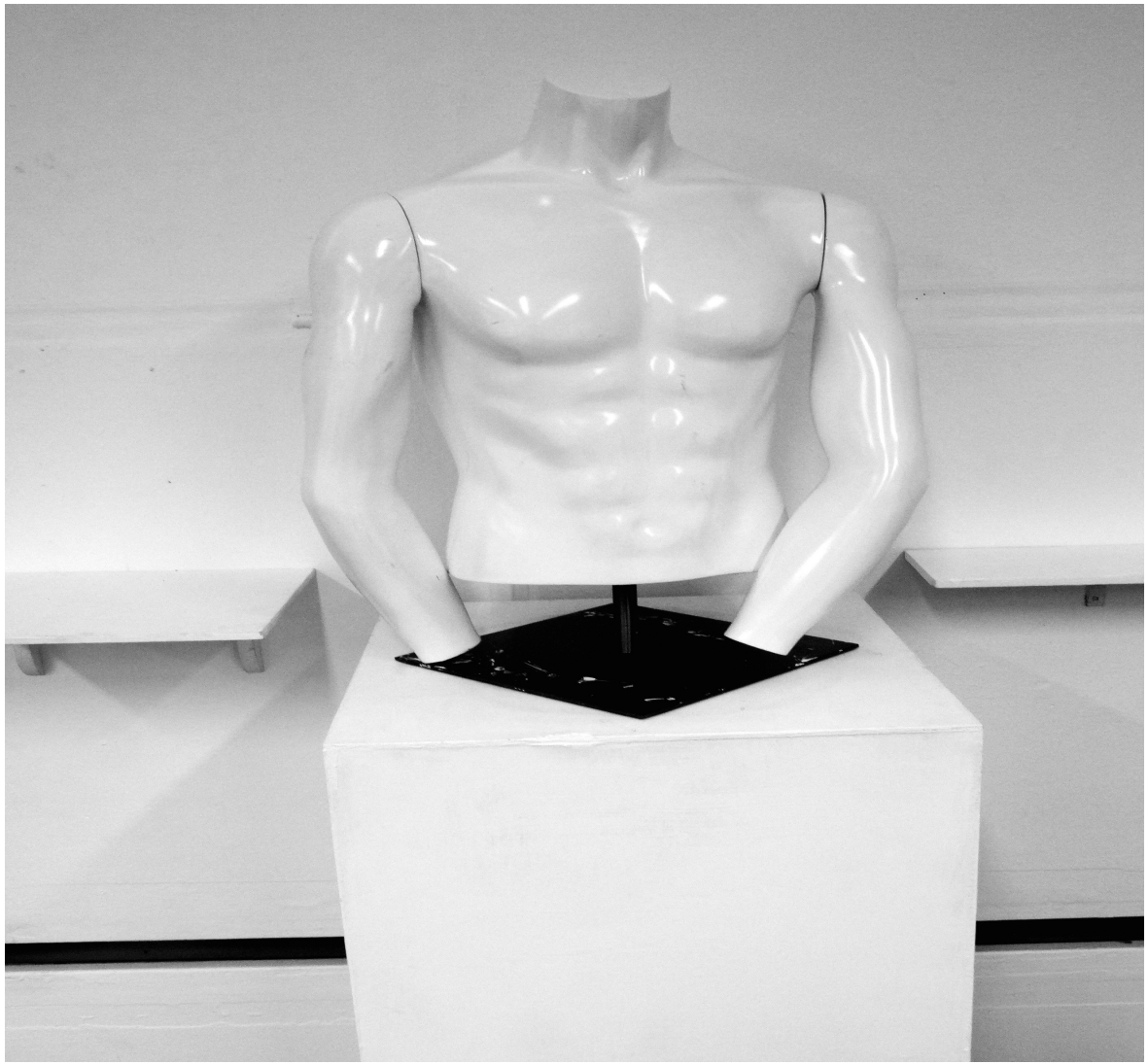


*The collected comments, and bag of stuff I assembled Tuesday/Wednesday - a mixture of purchased, scrounged and found things.*



*Pins! Hundreds of them! But no needles*





*The starting point*



*Dressing up the mannequin in the studio*



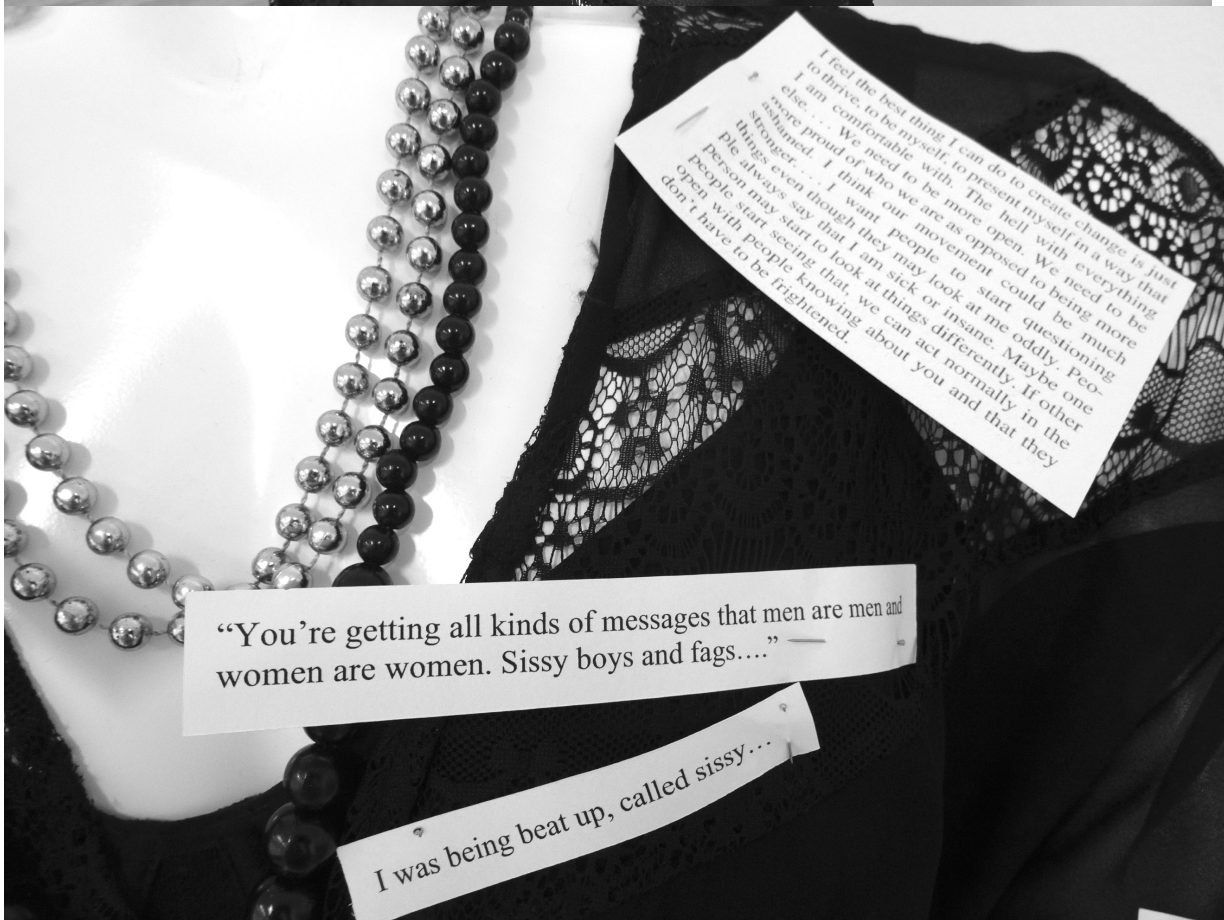
*The completed 'Binary' in situ. No statements were pinned to the back, as the piece is designed to be presented against a white wall, further enhancing the black/white starkness of the design. And the tacit metaphor of having one's 'back to the wall', which is a situation in which many trans people find themselves*

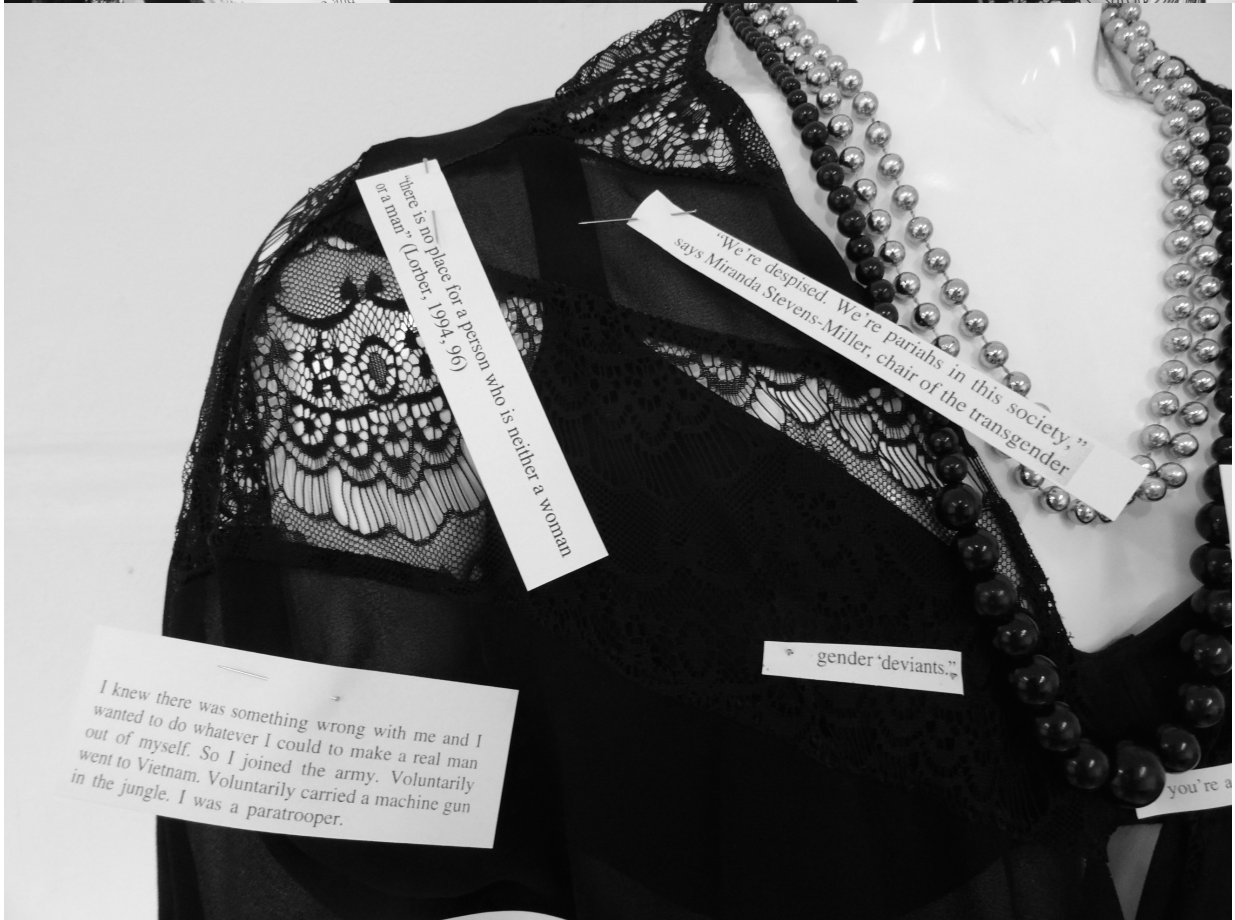
















materials / objects post history. e.g. Golden Thread /  
 Belfast 2013 - chairs from the Maze Prison.  
 mass placement - history - juxtapositions - shapes -  
 materiality - Can we existing materials to make new  
 narrative. e.g. the book that is normal blood. -  
 Photo montage - "Proof of Life" - of me? + "Morgan" - other  
 of me? Proof of what I am, who I am, where I am?  
 Police ID mug shot? (Smudged makeup, police / snar hassle?)  
 official Xposed representation of the self - or the self.  
 Me + me - 2 things that exist - ~~same~~ born  
 ephemeral, but I am more than the other.  
 Collect words of other T-persons' ideas of self in words to  
 be cut up & rearranged in collage around the images of  
 "the other" - a la "ego" + "alter ego".  
 Cog + to erg ogy m. Et in arcadia ego  
 Rebus(es) encompassing aspects of the self - to  
 think is to be, i.e. we think ourselves into  
 being.  
 [Screenshots of messages to my buddies on  
 FB as documentation in] Cog + to erg ogy m.  
 What are you? "I am not I am" (what other changed... as  
 God said unto Adam. As T-persons create - give life - to a  
 new person from inside themselves + make it real".  
 Items of femininity (for m → f): hair / lipstick / body shape  
 (breasts, e.g.) + the objects which give life to a new person;  
 + transform. ∴ a digital montage of real people, objects,  
 Questions? - copyright of imagery/music, e.g. Bowie / Kinks etc. +  
 presentation thereof. How valid is a 'digital  
 collage?' / must it be  
 "ephemeral"?  
 "ME + + + + + Helen Chadwick book  
 p. 148 - the Kaplan glove about life between life + art  
 Ciametti! - p. 72. Cragg - p. 158. BILL WARD  
 Steinbach - p. 44.  
 for 3D anim - "Lyndar.com" for tutorials X  
 Visual interaction between image + space - body +  
 space - e.g. that images projected on to a surface, an object,

Unsure which way to take this project as yet: either individual TG people's thoughts as to 'the self' (or both sides of it?) or other people's views (often contradictory + sadly, at times, hostile or derogatory) of their projected selves. Utilise objects of the gender transformation in the assemblage. Or both!

1st Step - group msg. posted on Facebook soliciting feedback

Seeking positive + negative views of TG people, as well as their own thoughts of themselves.

The separation of mind/sexuality + physical body. Prior words on to textiles? + dress female dummy in the resulting fabric(s) or costume? Or patchwork a number of clothing items together as a creation in itself. Cf. the classic "Tucking Trans" T-Shirt ...

How about... lean clothes on a MALE dummy torso?? ~~again~~ again, w/ the objects of transformation. So I'm taking the perceptions + projecting them on to a body... as others do... both positively + negatively. Perhaps seek to reflect the confusion/contradiction that inhabits so many TG people.

\*The notion of "it's just a word" - yet words have such power. And like the Afro-American tactic of reclaiming the "n-" word - defusing that word of its associations. \*

Background - - -

Recently wrote a comic strip story ~~about~~ that featured a TG character who had to comment on the issue of TGs in Russia under Putin. - - -

"Pin the words" on - safely pinned - to the fabrics, to the construct, to the installation.

2pm - no response as yet } Hmm.....  
From anyone.

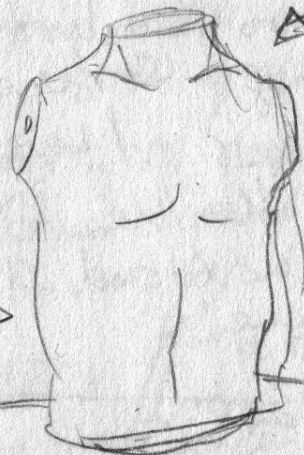


## \* Documentation on \*

In March, summer 2016 - ~ use FB itself as a part of the documentation process? or create a blog -

Printouts - list of contributors - screenshots - collated online @ blog. Shape the documentation so a stranger can understand the whole piece - to tell the narrative of the work.

\* Create documents approp. to the work \*



The starting point for the transformation - a male body draped in a female article of clothing.

Words/phrases/perceptions pinned, written, painted, on to the basic body - ~ words written on different coloured papers, on other found surfaces, ~~to~~ relevant

to their weight, power, strength.

I can add an old female head to it + wig...

The incongruity of the ♀ head on the ♂ body is an unavoidable side-effect in reality of TG people... whose physiques are plainly more masculine?? Due to (pre- or, pre-hormones, etc)

Tue PM → Acquired a mannequin - men's / only 1 hand.

That's OK, the hand can hold a lip stick, other makeup's unusable. A bra + see-through top can be put on the figure now.



## Conclusion, and After-Thoughts

As stated, my aim with the piece was to present to the general public real things that have been said to, and by, people on the TG spectrum and allow the viewer to judge whether or not they may agree, disagree, sympathise, with these comments and viewpoints; or be upset, angry, or inclined to think more deeply as a result of having experienced them. As such, the primary purpose of the work was really to engage with gallery/studio visitors, to invite them to interact with the work by reading the tags, and to go away with thoughts or emotions as a result of having done so, and perhaps also to reconsider their own, possibly *binary*, view of gender identification. In short, it was a piece of art that was intended to be, literally, *read*, as well as being both simple and direct in its overall statement (I hope...)

As the piece was never exhibited publicly, it therefore was not able to achieve this ambition, and for this reason it's a concept to which I would like to return in future, in a less ephemeral form and, ideally, featuring more direct commentary from my primary sources\*. Any future reboot would be of a far more engaging nature, however, and might even be represented in whole or in part by some form of performance-based art – my original idea for this project which was quickly abandoned as being too complex to stage within the allocated timeframe for completion.

Putting this work together was an emotional experience for me – in presenting some of the most negative commentary and making it public, I felt I was, at times, also helping to perpetuate negative stereotypes about the group of people for whom I was trying to raise more positive awareness. Yet in some ways, that was the whole crux of the piece – to silently ask the question of the viewer, 'Do you think this kind of comment/accusation/treatment/behaviour is acceptable?' At the end of the day, my own view is that what an individual chooses to wear is of nobody's concern but that of the person wearing it, providing it abides by reasonably-enacted legislation and decent conduct which carefully consider the obligations of society and the freedom of the individual.

MB

October '16

\* I did, thankfully, receive a trickle of additional comments from others after the 'closing date' for submissions, so these have been saved on file for such a future reworking. Of special interest was the one comment I got from a female-to-male transitioner, the only one from those I canvassed, or was able to find documented in my primary source text, *Sexualities*. This area of the TG spectrum is far smaller and even less popularly understood than the far more common male-to-female world, yet it too is equally deserving of attention – though this would need to be reserved for the future, incorporating a secondary object of gender identification, and therefore was outwith the scope of the original piece.

## Project History

October 10<sup>th</sup> – brief handed out, initial notes taken, brainstorming, early thoughts

October 11<sup>th</sup> – basic concept finalised, mannequin body obtained, initial request for contributions sent via Facebook friends; photographic documentation begun

October 12<sup>th</sup> – further request for contributions sent out to other special interest groups on Facebook; *Sexualities* book, clothing and other items obtained; book quotations and original Facebook responses scanned/printed and pinned to mannequin

October 13<sup>th</sup> – textual documentation begun; further personal responses pinned to mannequin

October 14<sup>th</sup> - photographic documentation concluded with studio technician assistance for lighting and camera setup; further written documentation developed

October 24<sup>th</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> – documentation process continued and concluded

## Additional

Whilst documenting this project, a good TG friend of mine announced on her Facebook page that she had reported to Police Scotland a transphobic hate crime, in which she was spat on, from behind, whilst waiting to cross a road in Glasgow city centre, on October 22<sup>nd</sup>.

There was no other obvious motivation for this deeply troubling act.

The timing of this could not have been more significant to me, and this sad and disturbing piece of news truly put into context my feelings for having embarked upon this project in the first place.

Having sought the victim's personal permission, I reproduce her initial public messages about the event here as the final word on the subject:



23 October at 02:43 · 

Transphobia.

Whilst walking through Glasgow city centre, earlier, I was waiting to cross the road by some lights in Argyle Street, when I was spat upon ... from behind ... in my hair.

I have no idea who my attacker was. Still, it's nice to think that I might've made someone's day.

Please post only constructive comments.

Update: I have reported this hate crime to Police Scotland.

 Like  Comment  Share



checked in to  Greenock Police Station.  
24 October at 17:09 · Greenock · 

Taking the spitting incident to the next level. I haven't made a witness statement in years.

Update: Witness statement made. Attended by two very kind officers. Take note. We should be encouraged to report all hate crimes immediately. Police Scotland, I'm told, rate responding to such matters as a high priority. I'm reassured that they would've attended the scene, on the day, with the least possible delay.

There is a realistic possibility of identifying me on CCTV footage, which means there is a reasonable chance of having an image of the offender. We shall see.